

Merchant and Nuuanu Streets --
Wing Wo Tail & Co. Building
923 Nuuanu Street
Honolulu
Honolulu County
Hawaii

HABS No. HI-55 A

HABS
HI,
2-HONLU,
18-A-

WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

Historic American Buildings Survey
National Park Service
Department of the Interior
Washington, DC 20013

HABS
HI,
2-HONLU,
18-A-

HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY

MERCHANT AND NUUANU STREETS COMMERCIAL BUILDINGS
WING WO TAI & CO. BUILDING

HABS No. HI-55 A

Location: 923 Nuuanu Street, City and County of Honolulu, Hawaii.
Zone 1, sec. 7, Plat 02, Tax Key #37.

Present Owner: First American Title Co.
220 S. King Street, 7th floor
Honolulu, HI 96813

Present Occupant and Use: Hawaii Society, American Institute of Architects

Significance: The Wing Wo Tai & Co. building was built to accommodate a leading Chinese import business. Having mainland branches, the company was well known and attracted visitors as well as local shoppers. Located between the primarily Caucasian Merchant Street area and the adjacent Chinatown, the building expressed the integration of the two cultures.

PART I. HISTORICAL INFORMATION

A. Physical History:

1. Date of erection: 1916. Local newspapers record in the history of the Wing Wo Tai & Co. the erection of this structure in 1916. [The Honolulu Star Bulletin, 11-1-1928, p. 6, and The Honolulu Advertiser, 10-31-31, p. 8.] The building does not appear on the 1914 Sanborn map, and does on the Sanborn corrected to 1925. Finally, the date "1916" appears inscribed on the right of the company name in the pediment on the Nuuanu Street facade. (The date of the company's arrival in Honolulu, "1877," is inscribed on the left.)
2. Architect: Not known.
3. Original and subsequent owners:

1916	The Wing Wo Tai & Co. erected the building.
1935	sold to J. W. Austin Estate
1956	sold to Office Appliance Co., Ltd.
1976	sold to Wing Wo Tai Assoc.
1986	sold to First American Title Corporation

[Tax records, buildings permits, and Historic Hawaii File, "Merchant Square," publicity packet.]

4. Original plans and construction: The Wing Wo Tai & Co. building has undergone several alterations, and its original plan is not known. A 1928 newspaper photograph shows two views of the structure, one exterior and one interior, which are the earliest located photographs. The first-floor facade was divided into two tripartite bays of unequal size, the left (northeast, mauka) being the larger. The middle portion of the left bay was a doorway, flanked by the two windows. The composition of the right, smaller bay was indiscernible in the photograph. Interior photographs of 1930 indicate an open first floor with central piers. [Honolulu Advertiser, 11-1-1930, p.2] These are probably the "one row cast iron columns" named on the Sanborn corrected to 1925. The architect of the 1977 renovation determined that originally the first floor had a mezzanine over the rear third of the structure, and the second floor was fifteen feet above the first. The ceilings were plastered.
5. Alterations and additions: The alterations that occurred when Office Appliance Co., Ltd., began occupation in 1956 are not documented. Under Wing Wo Tai Association's ownership, the building was renovated in 1977 with additional changes through 1979 by Anderson/Reinhardt, Architects, who created an open stairway core and made the additional floor space and height changes documented in the architectural information. In addition, they added a kitchen, toilets, and courtyard for its conversion to restaurant use. [Building permit, 2-1-02-37, #'s 118044, 101285, 76340, 113057, 63224, 126539.] A further renovation is planned for the left half of the building, as well as the introduction of a three-story addition to the rear of the building, construction expected to begin in the fall of 1987.

B. Historical Context:

The origin of Honolulu's Wing Wo Tai & Co. is in a Hong Kong mercantile business founded in 1845. In that year, Chiu Yui Tin used the equivalent of \$30 to open the Chong Wo store. He gradually expanded his business to include exporting, and the firm became the Chong Wo Chan. The firm's success called for eventual expansion to Canton, Fatshan, Shanghai, Hongkow, Dairen, and, in the early 1870s, San Francisco, where the business operated under the name Wing Wo Sang. This company, in turn, saw room for expansion to the Hawaiian islands, which had been the home for two generations to Chinese sugar laborers. In 1877 the firm opened the Wing Wo Tai & Co. store at 941 Nuuanu Street, corner of Nuuanu and King streets. This store was very popular with Chinese and tourists alike, who had heard of the store on the Mainland. The high-quality goods included teakwood furniture, silks and embroidered materials, ivory goods, liquors, and grocery merchandise. In addition to its retail business, the store also operated a wholesale supplier business. [Honolulu Star Bulletin, 10-31-1931, p.8, 10-31-1938, p.7; Honolulu Advertiser, 11-1-1928, p.6, 11-1-1930, p.2, 11-1-1938, p.4]

The company is noteworthy for one unfortunate historic incident. On December 11, 1899, the bookkeeper of the Wing Wo Tai & Co. was the first to be diagnosed as having been stricken with the bubonic plague. This plague was to ravage the city, resulting in city-organized fires, beginning in January, 1900, attempting to check the spread of the disease when quarantine proved unsuccessful. Records of the Board of Health of Hawaii cite various petitions made by both the Wing Wo Chan Co., who occupied the site of the present Wing Wo Tai & Co. building, and the Wing Wo Tai Co. to be allowed to reopen their offices and stores, respectively. The Board of Health was necessarily very reluctant to do so, and finally the decision was made on February 8, 1900, that only after removing all partitions, treating floors with sulphuric acid, tearing down all lean-to's and sheds in the back yard, destroying all food stuff, and fumigating all other goods, the store would be allowed to reopen. [Board of Health Records, 1899-1900, Hawaii Archives.]

Although the company sold the building in 1935, Wing Wo Tai & Co. continued to operate at that location until 1955, when the company ceased operation, as documented by Honolulu city directories.

The Wing Wo Tai & Co. building also housed an office appliance store and restaurant. It is currently occupied by the Hawaii Society, AIA, and after remodelling will be occupied as well by its owner, First American Title Company of Hawaii.

Report prepared by Laura S. Alderman, Project Historian.

For background information on this downtown neighborhood, see HABS No. HI-55.

PART II. ARCHITECTURAL INFORMATION

A. General Statement:

1. Architectural character: The Wing Wo Tai & Co. building is a good example of a two-story commercial building executed in the classical idiom. The portion of the facade above the projecting canopy is practically unchanged. While the ground floor entrance facade has been altered, it maintains the general character of an early twentieth-century commercial building.
2. Condition of fabric: Generally in good condition, having undergone a major renovation in 1977-79 at which time the interior spaces were totally changed. The building is scheduled for additional rehabilitation during the fall and winter of 1987. A three-story addition is projected to replace the patio to the rear.

B. Description of Exterior:

1. Over-all dimensions: 40'-6" x 71'-0" x approximately 36' high; a two-story, rectangular commercial block with a four-bay upper facade.
2. Foundations: Volcanic stone, stuccoed.
3. Walls: Volcanic stone stuccoed and plastered. In composition, the first floor has a recessed center entry with splayed sides, flanked by plate glass storefronts. Shop entries are on the angled walls. Positioned at the rear center of the recessed portion is an open stairway to the basement and second levels. The first-floor facade is visually divided into two bays by a large stuccoed masonry pier. The upper facade is divided into four bays, articulated by stuccoed pilasters, and an entablature topped by a parapet. There are narrow, horizontal recessed panels above and below the paired windows in each bay.
4. Structural system, framing: Side bearing walls support horizontal timber work. There is a line of 8" x 8" timber columns through the center of the building. The columns support an 8" x 16" timber girder which, in turn, carries 6" x 14" beams, 9' o.c. Floor planks 5" wide span between the beams. The roof framing is of exposed heavy timber trusses approximately 11' o.c., spanning side to side. The first floor is carried on 2" x 12" joists, 16" o.c.
5. Porches, stoops, balconies, bulkheads: A flat canopy extends from the building to the curb line. Angled iron tie bars secure the canopy to the wall.
6. Openings:
 - a. Doorways and doors: Storefront entrances are situated on the flanks of the splayed recess. The doors are of wood with glass panel. The door to the right has beveled leaded glass. Both doors are modern additions. Along the makai side of the building is a steel fire exit door. Two pairs of wood and glass panel doors provide access from the rear of the building to the enclosed patio (not visible from outside the building).
 - b. Windows, shutters: The second-floor front has four pairs of fixed glass windows which suggest, in composition, one-over-one-light double-hung sash. The wood-trimmed windows measure approximately 2'-6" x 7'-6". Each pair is set within a framed recess with a mullion separating the units.

A series of horizontal fixed-pane windows appear to have been transoms to the original first-floor spaces. The rear facade has four fixed-pane windows of various sizes and random position. There are several skylights on the roof.

8. Roof:

- a. Shape, covering: There is a low sloping roof with parapets. The roof surface is of rolled composition roofing. Mechanical equipment is positioned on the roof. There is a series of modern skylights on the roof.
- b. Cornice, parapet: An abstract pediment form is positioned over the two central bays and states the building's name ("WING WO TAI & CO.") in raised upper case letters in a recessed panel. In a recessed panel to the left is the date "1877" in raised numerals and in a similar panel to the right is "1916." Short pilaster forms separate the pediment from side bays and align with second-floor pilasters. The entablature has a frieze of triglyphs alternating with recessed panels suggesting metopes. The four center panels have vent grilles.

C. Description of Interior:

The two-story building has been modified to accommodate three levels. Consequently there is no correspondence between the facade and the floor levels.

1. Floor plans: The basement has been subdivided for modern offices. The rear portion of this level is given over to toilet rooms accessible from the first floor by the fire stair.

The first floor has a recessed entry centered on the front with stores to either side. While the building's facade expresses two different store spaces, the first floor is actually one large space interrupted only by columns and vertical service elements. To the rear of the building is a 16'-6" x 37'-6" patio having an enclosure wall about 15' high.

The second floor has been modified for modern offices, one to each side. Both offices are accessible from an entrance landing centered at the front of the building. Each office has a two-story space at the street front. A third-floor mezzanine overlooks these spaces. Modern partitions divide the second floor spaces.

The third floor was created as a result of reduction in ceiling heights. Exposed trusswork adds to the height of the spaces. Modern partitions divide the space.

2. Stairways: The main stairway is located at the center front. It is open to the exterior but secured with an iron gate. A fire stair is situated in the right rear corner of the building. Interior stairways provide access between the second and third levels on each side.
3. Flooring: Modern plywood floors are covered with carpets on the second and third floors; the plywood floors of the first floor are uncarpeted.
4. Wall and ceiling finish: Modern partitions with wallboard. At the third level, stone walls have been exposed from the bottom of the trusses up. Exterior walls are plastered; walls are painted.
5. Openings:
 - a. Doorways and doors: All modern flush doors when doorways contains doors.
 - b. Windows: Skylights give light to the upper reaches of the building.

D. Site:

1. General setting and orientation: The building is situated mid-block on the Diamond Head side of Nuuanu Street in the Chinatown Historic District. It sits at the front property line and is contiguous with a modern building to the left (mauka side). An alleyway is to the right (makai side). The front faces Ewa which is approximately NNW in general orientation. There is a concrete sidewalk between the building and curb. The building occupies the entire site; the site has no landscaping and no outbuildings.

In this description, local designation is given for orientation. "Mauka" means mountain direction, "Makai" means sea direction, "Diamond Head" means in the direction of Diamond Head crater, "Ewa" means in the direction of the town of Ewa (opposite Diamond Head direction).

Report prepared by Robert C. Giebner, Project Supervisor.

PART III. SOURCES OF INFORMATION

A. Early Views:

Bishop Museum Photograph Collection:

File: "Geography. Oahu. Honolulu Streets. Nuuanu Ave. Downtown Area"

Album 12, Page 31, "B. Mus. 1106, Gartley 197. Nuuanu Street, Honolulu, ca 1890?"

Baker, Ray Jerome, Honolulu Then and Now. #31118, "Nuuanu Street from Queen. Dated about 1892"

Honolulu Advertiser, 11-1-1928, p.6, and 11-1-1930, p.2. (Includes exterior and interior photographs.)

Hawaii State Archives, file, "EPIDEMICS- Bubonic Plague (10)". Contains photographs of Nuuanu Street during fire of 1900.

B. Primary and Unpublished Sources:

Hawaii Directories, 1880-present. Hawaii State Archives and Bishop Museum Library.

Honolulu Business Directory. 1889. Bishop Museum Library.

Maps: Lion Fire Insurance Company, 1879. Bishop Museum Map Library.

B. F. Dillingham Fire Insurance Company for Board of Fire Underwriters of Honolulu, 1900, and 1906 corrected to 1911.

Sanborn Map Company, 1914 uncorrected, 1914 corrected to 1925, 1927 uncorrected, and 1927 corrected to 1951.

Tax Records, Tax Assessor's office, Honolulu Police Station, 842 Bethel Street, Honolulu, Hawaii. Records for "Zone 2, Sec. 1, Plat 02, #37."

Building Permits, Municipal Building, Honolulu, Hawaii. #'s 118044, 101285, 76340, 113057, 63224, and 126539.

Minutes of the Board of Health Meetings, January 11, 1899 to April 30, 1900, Hawaii State Archives.

Hawaii State Archives, "Historic Buildings Task Force" file #IMK 2-1-02-37. University of Hawaii architecture student's 1966 report on the Wing Wo Tai & Co. building.

Historic Hawaii Foundation File, "Merchant Square". Contains recent information regarding ownership and usage.

C. Secondary and Published Sources:

Honolulu Advertiser

11-1-1928, p.6

11-1-1930, p.2

11-1-1930, p.4

Honolulu Star Bulletin

10-31-1931, p.8

10-31-1938, p.7

Historic Hawaii News

5-1979

11-1985

PART IV. PROJECT INFORMATION

This project was jointly sponsored by First American Title Co., Historic Hawaii Foundation, and the National Park Service. Recorded under the direction of Kenneth L. Anderson, Chief of HABS, and Alison K. Hoagland, HABS Historian, the project was completed during the summer of 1987 at the Honolulu field office. Project supervisor was Robert C. Giebner (University of Arizona); project historian was Laura S. Alderman (Washington, D.C.); architectural foreman was J. Scott Anderson (Washington, D.C.); and architectural technicians were Coy E. Burney (University of Maryland), Kenneth R. Imoehl (University of Arizona), and Michel A. van Ackere (Brown University).